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Pentagon Challenged

The C.I.A.'s Heretical View of Soviet Strength

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WASHINGTON

THE Central Intelligence Agency touched off a behind-the-scenes debate in January by concluding that its previous assessments of the size of Soviet underground nuclear explosions were too high and deciding that its procedures for making such estimates should be altered.

That decision, which came to light last week, was made by William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence. The new procedure, which is expected to lower by some 20 percent the estimates of the yields of Soviet underground blasts, raises questions about Administration assertions that Moscow has "likely" violated the Threshold Test Ban Treaty of 1974. Officials remained divided at week's end over whether Washington should amend or drop that contention.

The revision also focused new attention on the C.I.A.'s competition with the Defense Intelligence Agency, which opposed changing the estimating procedure.

It is hardly the first time the two agencies have disagreed. Last year, the C.I.A. modified its estimate of the accuracy of the SS-19, one of the Soviet Union's most modern missiles. According to the C.I.A.'s calculations, which are disputed by Defense Intelligence, the Soviet weapon is less of a threat to American missile silos than previously supposed.

The C.I.A. has also raised questions about the Administration's contention that the construction of an early warning radar in central Siberia means the Soviet Union is moving to deploy an anti-missile defense of its territory. A classified assessment prepared by the C.I.A. in 1984 and coordinated with the intelligence community says the facility is "not well designed" to serve as a battle management radar, and C.I.A. officials have stressed its vulnerability to attack in Congressional testimony. The D.I.A. has not publicly raised such questions. Both agencies agree that the radar is a legal violation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty.

The two agencies have also taken different views on the rate of Soviet military spending. But they do not always disagree. Last year, the defense agency quietly lowered its estimate of the range of the Soviet Backfire bomber, bringing it close to C.I.A. estimates, and undercutting the claim that the bomber should be considered a weapon with intercontinental range.

The key question is what these frequent divisions between the two agencies signify. Some experts say the C.I.A. is prepared to take a more objective view of strategic issues — even when it clashes with the rhetoric of some Administration officials. Jeffrey T. Richelson, a professor at American University, said the defense agency tends to take a harder line in part because officials there are reluctant to undermine the case for new United States weapons by casting doubt on the effectiveness of Soviet systems.

In the case of the decision to change the procedure for estimating the size of nuclear tests, the accuracy of the SS-19 and the limitations of the Krasnoyarsk radar, the C.I.A. view appears to represent the majority in the United States intelligence community.

But the C.I.A. has drawn fire from some staunch conservatives, who have been demanding that the agency alter its estimates. Senator Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina, complained in a letter to President Reagan last October of a continuing "bias" at the C.I.A. toward underestimating the Soviet threat.

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